

## Unit Six: Main Teachings of the Buddha (Part III, Ethical teaching)

The teachings of the Buddha mainly encompass two fields, namely, suffering and its cessation. The Buddha was quite capable of explaining these two fields in terms of ethics rather than logical and metaphysical assumptions. Taking into his account the nature of Buddhist teaching, S. Radhakrishnan observed:

"We find in the early teaching of Buddhism, three marked characteristics: an ethical earnestness, an absence of any theological tendency and an aversion of metaphysical speculation."<sup>1</sup>

According to the Buddha, both suffering and cessation of suffering are grounded on morality. Suffering is the result of immoral impulses of the mind. Hence the cessation of suffering can only be attainable through avoidance of immoral impulses and development of moral impulses; in brief, through the moral perfection. This process of moral perfection is clearly depicted in the admonition or the message of the Buddhās:

*"Sabbapāpassa akaraṇam – kusalassa upasampadā  
Sacittapariyodapanam – etam buddhāna sāsanaṃ"*<sup>2</sup>

Avoidance of all the evils, achievement of the wholesome  
and purification of the mind is the message of the Buddhās.

The Buddha presented the nature of suffering and the way of its emergence as his doctrine to make the people understand about the reality, in order to encourage them in the path leading to the cessation of suffering. People who came to follow the spiritual path with the understanding of the reality were only few, who had the adequate intellectual capacity. It was the intention of the Buddha that the maximum number of disciples would achieve the benefit of his teaching. For this purpose, the Buddha had to present different kinds of teaching to take the people out of the unfavorable conditions and into the path. We find the teachings of the Buddha pertaining to society, economy and polity in the discourses. The aim of these kinds of teachings was to advise people to lead a sound moral life, which in the long run would be conducive to follow the spiritual path. The salient feature of these teachings is that ethics plays a major role in all these teachings.

### Social Teaching

In many respects, there were various kinds of social illness prevailing among the people in the social background of the Buddha. These social evils were really compelling people into material as well as spiritual degeneration. There was a social unrest due to the discrimination among the people. A class of people was deprived of all the human rights such as religious, political, social and professional freedom. This discrimination and exploitation of so-called lower caste developed into a social evil. Position of women in the social background of the Buddha was also not so different from that of the unprivileged class of the society.<sup>3</sup>

The Buddha not only criticized these types of unreasonable discriminations but also argued against them, showing the lack of their justifiability. The principle of discrimination among the people was based on the religious belief that the god created people of four castes according to

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<sup>1</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, 1.P 358.

<sup>2</sup> Dhammapada

<sup>3</sup> Altekar, A. S., The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, Banaras Hindu University, 1956, P.204-5

the quality and the duty (*guṇa-karmavibhāgasah*) of each caste.<sup>4</sup> So it was considered that the people inherit their higher and lower status by birth. The Buddha's criticism was mainly leveled against the belief that man is higher or lower by birth. There are many discourses such as *Vasala*,<sup>5</sup> *Kaṇṇakatthala*,<sup>6</sup> *Assalāyana*,<sup>7</sup> *Vāsetṭha*,<sup>8</sup> and *Soṇadaṇḍa*<sup>9</sup> devoted to show the injustice of the discrimination among the people. In the *Vasala-sutta*, the Buddha empathetically enumerated with sound arguments that the man becomes higher or lower not because of the birth but because of the deeds:

*"Na jaccā vasalo hoti- na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo  
Kammunā vasalo hoti-kammunā hoti brāhmaṇo"*<sup>10</sup>

*"None is by birth an outcast  
None is by birth a brāhmaṇa  
By deed one becomes an outcast  
By deed one becomes a brāhmaṇa*

The Buddha in many occasions directed his teachings in order to promote the position of women in the society. He clearly pointed out that women had a dignified and important part to play in society, and insisted upon her capacity in knowledge and virtue. Once, the Buddha gave advice to king Kosala to look after his newly born baby girl, emphasizing possible high qualities of a woman:

*Itthī pi hi ekacchiyā seyyā posā narādhipa  
Medhāvinī sīlavatī sassudevā patibbatā  
Tssā yo jāyati poso sūro hoti disampati  
Evam subhagiyā putto rajjam pi anusāsati.*<sup>11</sup>

*'A woman child, O lord of men, may prove  
Even a better offspring than a male  
For she may grow up wise and virtuous,  
Her husband's mother reverencing, true wife.  
The boy that she may bear may do great deeds,  
And rule great realms, yea, such a son  
Of noble wife becomes his country's guide.'*<sup>12</sup>

There were different types of immoral habits among the people, which led them to material and spiritual degeneration. As the Buddha pointed out in the *Sigālovāda-sutta*,<sup>13</sup> they were addicted to intoxicants, loitering in the streets at unseemly hours, frequenting theatrical shows, indulging in gambling, associating with evil companions, and displaying the habit of idleness. The Buddha condemned them showing their dangers. Many more immoral human weaknesses were

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<sup>4</sup> Bhagavat Gita

<sup>5</sup> *Vasala-Suttanipāta*, 116-142

<sup>6</sup> *Kaṇṇakatthala*-M.11. p.125ff

<sup>7</sup> *Assalāyana*-M. 11. p.142ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Vāsetṭha*-M.11. pp.196ff.

<sup>9</sup> *Soṇadaṇḍa*-D.1. pp.111ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Vasala-sutta*, *Suttanipāta*, 116-142

<sup>11</sup> S. 1. 96

<sup>12</sup> *Kindred Saying*, 1. p. 111

<sup>13</sup> D. 111. p. 180-86.

shown in the *Parābhava sutta*.<sup>14</sup> For an example, speaking of the factors that led to the downfall of the person both materially and spiritually, the Buddha tried in that discourse to draw the attention of the people on the following immoral habits which can be assumed to be existing in the society then:

*"The man, who is addicted to women (given to a life of debauchery), is a drunkard, and a gambler, destroys whatever he received".*

*Itthidhutto surādhutto – Akkhadhutto ca yo naro  
Laddham laddgam vināseti – tam parābhavato mukham.*<sup>15</sup>

It was the nature of the Buddha that whenever he talked about the bad aspects of the people, he never forgot to suggest wherever good aspects as well to replace the bad aspects. Good moral qualities, which should be with the people were brought out in the *Mangala sutta*.<sup>16</sup> There is no other religious master like the Buddha, who raised his persuasive voice against the unethical characters of the people and who encouraged the people in ethical excellence.

The Buddha recommended five precepts as the guiding principle of the people in their daily life, and thereby the Buddha intended a society, where the members of it respect and protect the rights of each other. The first precept is a promise to respect the life of the beings without killing and harming them (*Pāṇātipātā veramaṇi*) and the second, to respect and protect the right of properties of others, without taking them in the way of theft or by force (*Adinnādānā veramaṇi*). The third precept points to the fact that one must respect uninterrupted mutual relation of husband and wife (*Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇi*). The fourth precept enumerates not to violate the dignity of others by cheating with lying (*Musāvādā veramaṇi*). The last one is a promise to respect and protect one's own life without harming it by means of liquor and drugs (*Surāmeraya-majjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇi*).

*Sigālovāda sutta* was presented to introduce the way how each unit of the society should perform its duty towards the other affected unit to protect its rights and privileges and thereby whole society become protected, happy, peaceful and harmonious. In this sutta, the whole society was classified into twelve units such as parents and children, teachers and pupils, husband and wife, friends and companions, laity and clergy, employers and employees. The social obligations of every individual have been insisted under the twelve units. For example, the reciprocal duties of the employer and his employees are shown in the sutta as follows: 'a master ministers to his servants and employees in five ways: by assigning them work according to their capacity and strength; by supplying them with food and wages; by tending them in sickness; by sharing with them unusual delicacies; and by giving them leave and gifts at suitable time. In these ways ministered to by their master, servants and employees love their master in five ways: they wake up before him; they go to bed after him; they take what is given to them; they do their work well; and they speak well of him and give him a good reputation.'<sup>17</sup>

## Teaching on Economy

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<sup>17</sup> D. 111. p. 180-86

The Buddha has insisted on the sound economical condition of the individual, the way how it is achieved and also the way how it is utilized, in his discourses. Poverty according to the Buddha is the main source for all sorts of individual and social evils. In the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda sutta*, talking about a certain period in the remote past, the Buddha has shown the danger involved in the poverty as follows:

*"Wealth not been given to the destitute, poverty became rife, from the growth of poverty, taking of what was not given increased, from the increased of theft, the use of weapons increased, from the increased use of weapons, the taking of life increased, from the increased in taking life, lying increased, from the increased in lying, backbiting increased, from the increased of backbiting, sexual misconduct increased."*<sup>18</sup>

According to Buddhism, it is the responsibility of both the state or the government and the individuals to take the action to eliminate poverty which leads to moral degeneration. *Kūṭadanta sutta* enumerates the need of the involvement of the king or the state to improve the economical condition of the citizens in order to ensure their security, safety and prosperity.<sup>19</sup> The state mediation in all economic ventures is a necessary condition for the well-being of the citizens in respect of their economic prosperity. The discourse points out the way how the state should support the relevant parties involved in economic ventures as follows:

*"Those who are interested in agricultural pursuits and cattle-breeding must be supplied with seeds, paddy and other necessities by the state.*

*Capital must be supplied to those who are engaged in trade and commerce.*

*Those who are in state service must be paid sufficiently for their services."*<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the state mediation, individuals also on their part should engage in their livelihood diligently and righteously. The Buddha in many discourses pointed out not only the way how one should acquire wealth and utilize it but also the reasons why one must have prosperity in wealth. The following sutta passage highlights the need of sound economical condition for an individual, according to the Buddha.

*"A wise man, who acquired fine requisites, cheers and pleases (therewith) not only himself but also his parents, his wife and children, his employees, craftsmen, and servants, his friends and colleagues. He institutes offerings for recluses and Brahmins stimulating spiritual growth, productive of future bliss, fruitful in happiness, conducive to celestial attainment. His case may be compared with a lovely lake, such as I spoke of, but which lies near to village or township, where the people can draw and drink from it, bathe in it, and use it for any other purpose. Such riches go to enjoyment and not to waste".*<sup>21</sup>

The Buddha has invited the thorough attention of the individuals to acquire wealth in a righteous way skillfully and energetically. Sloth and non-exertion are considered to be the obstacles for acquiring wealth.

Wealth acquired by an individual with his own effort in righteous and virtuous means leads him to experience four kinds of happiness according to the Buddha. They are happiness of ownership (*Atthi sukkha*), happiness of enjoyment (*Bhoga sukkha*), happiness of freedom from debt (*Anana sukkha*), and happiness of blamelessness (*Anavajja sukkha*). It is to be remembered that these four kinds of happiness entirely depend on the acquisition of wealth in righteous manner.

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<sup>18</sup> D. Cakkavatti-sīhanāda-sutta

<sup>19</sup> D. Kūṭadanta-sutta

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> S.I. 89-91.

Emphasizing this important condition of acquiring wealth in the Buddhist way of life to his chief lay disciple, merchant Anathapindika, the Buddha made it clear in the following way:

"And what is the happiness of ownership (of wealth)? There is the case where the son of a good family has wealth earned through his efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of his arm, and piled up through the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained. When he thinks, 'I have wealth earned through my efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of my arm, and piled up through the sweat of my brow, righteous wealth righteously gained,' he experiences bliss, he experiences joy. This is called the happiness of ownership.

"And what is the happiness of enjoyment or making use of wealth? There is the case where the son of a good family, using the wealth earned through his efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of his arm, and piled up through the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, partakes of his wealth and makes merit. When he thinks, 'Using the wealth earned through my efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of my arm, and piled up through the sweat of my brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, I partake of wealth and make merit,' he experiences happiness, he experiences joy. This is called the happiness of enjoyment.

"And what is the happiness of debtlessness? There is the case where the son of a good family owes no debt, great or small, to anyone at all. When he thinks 'I owe no debt, great or small, to anyone at all,' he experiences happiness, he experiences joy. This is called the happiness of debtlessness.

"And what is the bliss of blamelessness? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones is endowed with blameless bodily actions, blameless verbal actions, and blameless mental actions. When he thinks, 'I am endowed with blameless bodily actions, blameless verbal actions, and blameless mental actions,' he experiences happiness, he experiences joy. This is called the bliss of blamelessness."<sup>22</sup>

At the end of the discourse, the Buddha stressed that comparing the first three kinds of happiness with the last, namely, the happiness of blamelessness; they are not worth a sixteen part of the happiness arising from blameless behavior.<sup>23</sup>

## Teachings on Polity

The Buddha has never shown any interest in politics. But the Buddha did not tolerate any thing, which leads to material and spiritual downfall of the people, whether it is in the field of society or that of polity. Therefore, we can find the teachings of the Buddha, which are also relevant to the field of polity. In a number of occasions, the Buddha has enumerated that the righteousness of the ruler or ruling party is a necessary condition for the well-being of the citizens. Once, the Buddha brought forward this most important quality of the ruler in the name of an advice given by an ex-righteous king, who was a Universal Monarch to his son, who was the successor to the throne and who had turned unrighteous as follows:

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<sup>22</sup> A. iv. (Anana Sutta) 58

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

"Yourself depending on the Dhamma, honouring it, reveling in it, cherishing it, doing homage to it and venerating it, having Dhamma as your badge and banner, acknowledging Dhamma as your master, you should establish guard, ward and protection according to Dhamma, for your own household, your troops, your nobles and vassals, for brahmins and householders, town and country folk, ascetics and brahmins, for beasts and birds. Let not crime prevail in your kingdom and to those who are in need, give property."<sup>24</sup>

The concept of Universal Monarch in the field of polity is highly esteemed in the discourses of the Buddha for such a King rules the whole world in a righteous way.<sup>25</sup> According to the descriptions provided by discourses, the Universal Monarch, the righteous ruler, "rests on *Dhamma* (*Dhammam yeva nissāya*), honours *Dhamma* (*Dhammam skkaronto*), respects *Dhamma* (*Dhammam garukaronto*), esteems *Dhamma* (*dhammam apacāyamāno*), with *dhamma* as his banner (*dhammadhajo*), with *dhamma* as his standard (*dhammaketu*), with *dhamma* as his overlord (*dhammādhipateyyo*), he keeps constant watch and ward justly among his subjects (*dhammikam rakkhāvaraṇaguttim samvidahati*).<sup>26</sup>

The Universal Monarch rules the world by following ten principles. The ten principles, which were believed to be the factors for the prosperity and the security of the people, are enumerated as follows:

- To provide protection for one's own folk
- To provide protection for nobles
- To provide protection for the army
- To provide protection for vassals
- To provide protection for Brahmins and householders
- To provide protection for town and country dwellers
- To provide protection for religious men
- To provide protection for birds and beasts
- To keep the country free from crimes
- To give wealth to the poor

The concept of *Dasa rāja-dhamma* is also recognized in Buddhist Jātaka stories, which is referred to the ten duties of a righteous ruler. They are

- 1. *Dana* – Generosity. A king is supposed be generous.
- 2. *Sīla* – Moral virtues. A king must be endowed with moral qualities to be exemplary to his subjects.
- 3. *Pariccāga* – Philanthropy. In providing facilities, the king must have a liberal attitude towards his subjects.
- 4. *Ajjava* – Uprightness. The king must have the straightforwardness in implementing his orders. He must not act with bias.
- 5. *Maddava* – Gentleness. The king must be amenable to the demand of the public.
- 6. *Tapa* – Self-control. The king must be restraint from a life of luxury.
- 7. *Akkodha* – Absence of anger. The king must be free from the anger and ill will in order to be unbiased in his decisions.

<sup>24</sup> Sīhanāda-cakkavatti-sutta, D.

<sup>25</sup> D. 11. 16.

<sup>26</sup> A. 1.109

- 8. *Avihimsā* – Non-violence. The king must have compassion and friendliness.
- 9. *Khanti* – Patience or forbearance. The king must be patient towards his subjects.
- 10. *Avirodhatā* – The king should practice patience in implementing the will of the people. He must be ready to respect the good advice from the responsible parties.<sup>27</sup>

The teachings of the Buddha which were directly related to the political arena were intended to promote both material as well as spiritual standard of the rulers or the governing bodies, for they have the responsibility and obligation to develop the living condition of the people, which enable them to follow the path for freedom prescribed by the Buddha. The seven factors for welfare (*satta aparihāṇīya-dhamma*) have been introduced by the Buddha to Vajjin as a measure based on ethical norm for the progress of the republic.<sup>28</sup> They are as follows:

To hold full and frequent public assemblies.

To meet together in concord, rise in concord and carry out their undertaking in concord.

To enact nothing not already established, abrogate nothing that has already been enacted, and act in accordance with the ancient institutions of Vajjins as established in former days.

To honour, revere and support the Vajjin elders and to hold it a point of duty to listen to their words.

Not to take away by force or to abduct women or girls belonging to their clan and detain them.

To honour, esteem and support the Vajjin shrines, whether in town or country, and not to allow them to fall into disuse.

To provide fully rightful protection, defense and support for the Arahants among them, so that Arahants from far away may enter the realm and therein live in peace.<sup>29</sup>

## Recommended for Reference

Ven. Pategama Gnanarama, *An Approach to Buddhist Social Philosophy*, Published in Singapura, 2005 Nandasena Ratnapala, *Buddhist Sociology*.

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<sup>27</sup> Jataka I. p.260

<sup>28</sup> D. II. 75

<sup>29</sup> D. I. 74